



LEAPFEST!

2002

**Story and Photos
by MSG Bob Haskell**

JUST as balloonists know about the annual international hot-air balloon event in Albuquerque, N.M., so do military paratroopers know where they can find one of the best outlets to showcase their skills.

It's called Leapfest — an abbreviated title for the International Military Parachute Competition that takes place every August, through the sponsorship of the Rhode Island Army National Guard.

"A lot of German airborne soldiers want to come here," said Capt. Andreas Von Weihe of the German army's 31st Airborne Brigade. He participated in the recent Leapfest, the 20th anniversary of the event in West Kingston, R.I.

Forty-two teams competed, among them 15 foreign teams, the largest international contingent in Leapfest history.

Other teams came from South Africa, Tunisia, Ecuador, Thailand and El Salvador. The United Kingdom sent

two teams from its reserve Territorial Army. Three Canadian teams jumped. And Poland and Jordan participated for the first time.

This was Canada's year. One of the two teams from the Quebec-based Parachute Company, 3rd Battalion, Royal 22nd Regiment, took home the team championship, Canada's first. And the team's Cpl. J.P.A.M. Dufour became the individual champion.

Army National Guard teams from Georgia's 121st Infantry and Maryland's 20th Special Forces Group finished second and third.

SFC Charles Skipper from the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg, N.C., finished second, and Kentucky Army Guard LTC Wayne Burd took third. They were among the 168 parachutists who jumped from the back ramps of four Pennsylvania Army Guard CH-47 Chinook helicopters.

"Watching the jumpers took me back to my days in jump school at Fort Benning, Ga., in 1964," said Rhode Island resident and Navy veteran Dan Thompson, who observed the 500 jumps. "Watching them float down reminded me of how much I liked it."

The floating is the easy part for the competitive airborne troopers.

Each four-member team jumps three times from 1,500 feet with static lines that pull the chutes open. The parachutists land as close as they can to a large orange X in the middle of a manicured, 218-acre drop zone.

The jumpers are timed from the

(Above left) Two parachutists had a close encounter in the drop zone but separated and landed safely.

(Left) A paratrooper from Jordan signals his confidence in his equipment and the teammate who is checking him out.

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Soldiers



Two American paratroopers reach the target, a large X in the middle of a 218-acre drop zone.

moment they touch the ground until they touch the X. The individuals and teams with the lowest total times win.

Working the wind and maneuvering the chutes to land close to the target are keys to success.

"The wind can be a real problem, especially if you land down wind from the target and have to drag your chute back to it," said chief judge SFC Bob Perry, who has jumped in or worked on all 20 Leapfests.

The top team's name is inscribed on the Rhode Island Adjutant General's International Parachute Trophy.

The international team members are pinned with U.S. parachutist wings. That courtesy is common within the international airborne culture. Perry, for example, earned Thai "balloon wings" during his special forces days by parachuting from a dirigible that was tethered at 800 feet.

The bonding that the paratroopers from the different lands experience during the week or two they are together in Rhode Island is considered

as important as the competition.

"The big thing is the camaraderie," said Maj. Johan Joubert, an army reservist from South Africa. "It was interesting to meet the people from the South American countries. There's no other way we could have met them."

The four members of the South African team, all reservists, paid their own airfare, added Joubert, a civil engineer. That's how much they like Leapfest.

The Rhode Island hospitality includes a trip to nearby Boston for a Red Sox game and the chance to buy jeans at local outlet stores for considerably less money than they cost in Europe.

Whatever pressure the parachutists

feel is self-imposed.

"This competition is one of the few times these paratroopers can have a good time without being pushed to set up a defensive perimeter in the woods after they've jumped," Perry said. "It's a fun situation."

Royal Thailand Air Force Lt. Phiphukdee Vinit agreed.

"This is the first time I have had this kind of competition in my life. It's the same for my team," said the 17-year military veteran, who's been parachuting for a decade. "This Leapfest is a very excellent experience." □

Floating is the easy part...